ART AND DALIT CREATIVITY

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"After recognizing Dalit Literature, we may now turn to notice Dalit art and visual imagery". This is the way that Sukhadeo Thorat begins the foreword to Gary Tartakov's innovative book, "Dalit Art and Visual Imagery," published by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies through Oxford University Press in 2012.

A book launch for the Tartakov book was held in March 2013 featuring more than twenty Dalit artists and critics as well as film and performance. A workshop on "Harnessing Counter-Culture to Construct Identity : Mapping Dalit Cultural Heritage in Contemporary India," was convened by Ronki Ram in Leiden in December 2012. It is clear that Dalit art and Dalit cultural identity are becoming important subjects of academic inquiry in India. It is also clear that this is a new approach.

Tartakov stresses the absence of a Dalit presence in past and present Indian art and architecture. One chapter analyzes the way in which a Hindu temple illustrates caste. Four chapters are on the rise of Navayana Buddhist imagery created after the mass conversion beginning in 1956. He explains the widespread use of Navayana, the new vehicle, to describe the rational Buddhism which Dr. B. R. Ambedkar taught. He deals with the ubiquitous statues of Ambedkar and their meaning. He ends with the world of Safai Karamchari, the manual scavenger. This is a bold effort to extend our visualization of Dalit experience and its imagery to this most oppressed of the Dalit community.

Four chapters by other scholars extend our understanding of Dalit imagery. Nicholas Jaoul, a French scholar, writes of the symbolic use of Ambedkar's statues in Uttar Pradesh. Owen Lynch, emeritus professor of New York University, makes vivid the importance of the floats in the Ambedkar birthday parade in Agra. David Szanton, scholar and activist in bringing Mithila painting into public notice, tells of the inclusion of Untouchable woman's painting into this art tradition in Bihar. Saurabh Dube of El Colegio de México writes of the art of Savi Sawarkar from a personal as well as academic perspective. "Sawarkar's work focuses on an expressionistic diagraming of the historic roles and identities of the Varna system and the oppression of Muslims, Dalits and women found there. His paintings are angst filled cries of pain for the horrors of

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discrimination and the Devadasi system."

There is interest, especially in the south, in encouraging Dalit art and identity. The Dalit Resource Centre, a department of the Tamil Theological Institute at Madurai, has brought together artists and encouraged them to paint Dalit themes. In Kerala, a new ethnological museum, Adikalakendra, displays the extreme importance of the preservation of Scheduled Castes art and Scheduled Tribe's plethora of primitive art.

My Own Contacts

My own contacts with Dalit art and imagery are more extensive than I had realized when I began this section. A meeting of the Ashmitadarsh Literary Society in 1976 in Nagpur included a side meeting where young artists had a separate conference and exhibit.

Vasant Moon, in his autobiography, includes a wonderful image of Ambedkar by a fellow student in which the image of Ambedkar's face is sketched against that of the Buddha.

Sudhir Waghmare, portrait painter and also painter of his locality, Modi Khana in Pune, and his daughter, a graduate of Corcoran Art School in Washington D. C., have created a webpage, "Waghmare Buddhist Community Art (wcart.org)."

At a school established by Maxine Berntsen in Phaltan, Datta Ahiwale teaches art and also does portraits of Ambedkar and the Buddha.

One of the few folk art artifacts I have seen are small wooden statues of Dalits at work purchased by a friend of mine from someone who was going with them door-to-door in Delhi.

The late Chandrakant Ovhal, whose exhibit on Savitri Phule was held in Pune in 1997, was a highly regarded professional painter.

An untrained artist designated a small room at the University in Aurangabad as a Buddhist Vihar and worked a meditating Buddha into the grill.

I met Savi Sawarkar in 1993 at his first exhibit in Bombay. I purchased a painting, "Mahar and Dead Cow," and ever since then have been honored with a reference in his gratitude list.

The only art form women seem to do in Maharashtra is Rangoli, chalk drawings on the ground at festival times. This is probably related to the Mithila painting of the north but is not as sophisticated and is of course not portable.

My concluding story suggests the importance of the identification with the past great Buddhist's art among common folk. P. N. Kamble, a Buddhist employee of the Archeological Survey of India, followed a village rumor, half understood legends and villager's suppositions, brought to light previously unknown cave temples near the Ajanta complex. He has become a folk hero among the Buddhists of the district. The Buddhist of today claims the Buddhist heritage as his own.

The Art of the Past

Ambedkar was invited to establish Khalsa College in Bombay in 1937 when he was investigating the possibility of conversion and at that time he used classical Greek architecture as his model. Ever since then Buddhist symbolism has been the guiding principle for his educational architecture. The gateway of Milind College in Aurangabad was inspired by the gateways at Sanchi.

The Sanchi dome is much used as inspiration for Navayana architecture. Most striking are the Stupas at Dadar in Bombay which marks Ambedkar's cremation ground and the great monument on the conversion ground in Nagpur. One huge change is that the interior of the classical Stupa which held relics is now an open space where the devotee can honor Ambedkar's ashes and Buddha images.

While in Maharashtra, Navayana Buddhists take inspiration from classical Buddhist art and architecture, in the north Dalits transform or add architecture to the religion they belong to at the margin. The workshop called "Harnessing counter-culture to construct identity in contemporary India" held in Leiden featured several papers which made this process specific. Ronki Ram, convener, emphasized that Dalit identity formation and its representation tended to be characterized as multiple in it's contents and deeds. Another speaker noted that Dalit Deras (sacred compounds) figured most prominently in combining politics and religion in the Punjab. Ravidass, a 15th Century Saint-Poet, Deras are built in Europe as well as the Punjab offering devotees a place to gather, worship, banquet and listen to Ravidass poetry.

The Ambedkar Image

The visible expression of Dalit convictions and Buddhist identity all over India is an image of Dr. Babasaheb B. R. Ambedkar. In the cities a sophisticated metal image is often placed in front of the law courts. Professional artists such as Brahmesh V. Wagh create these. In small localities and in villages the image is very much a product of the common popular mind. Dr. Ambedkar is clad in a blue business suit with a white shirt and a red tie. If the image is plaster a pair of horn-rimmed glasses is perched on his nose. A pen is in his pocket. One hand is often raised in a teaching position. The other

holds a book, The Constitution of India. The garb is diametrically opposite a Gandhian hand spun dhoti and shawl. Ambedkar does not need to prove his identity with the poor. He is needed to show them an Untouchable can be modern, can rise to the highest of Indian expectations.

Sophisticated artists have produced many portraits of Dr. Ambedkar. Ram Tirpude made an excellent sketch of Ambedkar's head superimposed on the Buddha for the publication Vasant Moon put out in his college days. Pramodbabu Ramteke, faculty member of Government Chitrakala Mahavidyalaya in Nagpur, and various others have produced portraits. The chief quality of these images is dignity. The most unusual effort to portray Ambedkar is the "Bhimayana, Experiences of Untouchability," drawn by Durgabai Vyan and Subhash Vyan, Pardhan Gond artists from Madhya Pradesh. The story of Ambedkar which the art illustrates is told by S. Anand and Srividya Natarajan. Published by the Navayana Publishing House.

Images of Dalit heroes seem to dominate Dalit art today

There is very little in the Dalit past to serve as a base for contemporary Dalit art. What seems to be happening is that when asked, or as a matter of principle in the case of Savi Savarkar, the Dalit past in all of its horror is rendered into paintings. The other trend is to use Dalit heroes and do portraiture and there are many of these, not only Ambedkar but also Jyotirao Phule, the Shah Maharaja of Kolhapur, Kanshi Ram, Periyar from the south. This is a trend that one sees when there are anniversaries or scholarly meetings centered around these figures. Not only Ambedkar but also all these people who have worked hard in the past for Dalit equality now are being revived as inspiration for contemporary Dalit imagery.

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